

‘My truth’ is a mad concept

by Hugo Rifkind

- 1 Oh, hooray for actress Cate Blanchett. What wisdom! “One of the phrases I just cannot say,” she tells *Harper’s Bazaar*, “is ‘my truth’. I mean, the truth is the truth, isn’t it?” She’s right. By which, of course, I mean she’s speaking the truth. Although not just her truth. Or mine. Just truth. The real one.
- 2 What Blanchett is tilting at here is relativism, an ancient philosophical idea formalised in its modern sense, probably, by Immanuel Kant. My own personal truth has always been that Kant is completely unreadable, but my philosophy tutors disagreed, so I ended up having to read quite a lot of him. In a nutshell, relativism is the idea that truth is all about where you’re coming from. Your own experiences and preconceptions may make you think x, but other people may think y. Nobody is more innately right than anybody else. In some situations, in which differences must be respected, this is an immensely helpful framework in which to think. But it won’t tell you whether or not it’s the day on which bins are due to be collected.
- 3 Relativism is at its most useful when applied to ethics. Your culture tells you that women shouldn’t go to school; mine says they should. Whose is right? (Mine. I am not a relativist.) Whatever your view, it can still be helpful for both of us to realise that our views on this may be informed by our environments.
- 4 Today’s relativists, though, do not stop there. Relativism is at the core of identity politics, both on the left and the right. Fascists, propagandists and demagogues have all learnt to exploit the idea of their personal truths. Worse still, so has actress and lifestyle guru Gwyneth Paltrow. “My most lasting mistakes and the mess that comes with them have all stemmed from me not standing fully in my truth and speaking from it,” she wittered, in an essay to mark her 50th birthday. At the root of this is a sense of the empowerment of the self, and I doubt she means any harm. 23, do remember her dubious personal truth about matters of health and wellness.
- 5 Alas, we have not the space to chart how a philosophical conceit made its way from academia and totalitarianism to be so pervasive that it now even has a place in Gwyneth Paltrow’s daily life, but I’m tempted to blame Oprah Winfrey. Back in 2006 she championed *The Secret*, a book by the self-help guru Rhonda Byrne. Both dim and mad, it suggested achieving your life goals through a process of visualisation and self-belief.



- 6 As mere self-help, that's probably quite good advice. Yet Byrne's argument was not only that believing in yourself would be nebulously good for you. It was also that it would shape reality itself. As one incredulous critic put it at the time, "The cosmos isn't going to deliver a new car." Winfrey, though, described it as "the message I've been trying to share with the world on my show for the past 21 years." In such a mindset, not only are we all the centre of our own universes. We also get to demand to be the centre of everybody else's.
- 7 Of late, of course, the phrase "speaking my truth" has been most associated with Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, and especially since her interview with Winfrey. "Time for America to hear MY truth," Piers Morgan tweeted afterwards. "'My' truth about Meghan and Harry," Jeremy Clarkson wrote in *The Spectator*. Andrew Neil complained that "apparently what matters now is people have their own truth." Even in parody terms, "my truth" has become a textbook Meghan-ish phrase, to the extent that I've used it myself. Ironically enough, though, I can't actually find any record of her saying it, either in that interview or anywhere else. Although it is clearly the truth of many people that she has.
- 8 We should also acknowledge, of course, that when you largely have white men on one side of this argument and two women of colour on the other, it's probably worth pondering why. For modern-day mytruthers, it's a matter of faith that when people insist that there is only one objective truth, what they're really defending is a sort of western, patriarchal truth that cannot acknowledge its own biases.
- 9 [...]
- 10 Really, what we have here is the breakdown between matters of opinion and matters of fact. I can have a fairly strong view that it's wrong for you to punch me in the face, but I can't know for sure. A jury may well choose your truth. Facts, though, aren't like that. A crowd is one size or another size. An army has either crossed the border or it hasn't. History either happened or it didn't. Think of it this way: one person believes there are aliens, one does not. One of them is wrong. The truth is out there. Not in here.

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